

3. The Review up to April 26, 1976

In the next four months, the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Civil Rights Division, his principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General and the Chief of the Criminal Section of the Civil Rights Division, acting as a review staff, variously read portions of the FBI headquarters file on a person

who served as an adviser to Dr. King, portions of the FBI headquarters security file on Dr. King himself, portions of the FBI headquarters file on the assassination investigation, some Department (as opposed to FBI) files relating to Dr. King, and other Bureau documents including everything on Martin Luther King, Jr., held in the late J. Edgar Hoover's official, confidential and personal files.

By a memorandum to the Attorney General dated April 9, 1976, the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Civil Rights Division submitted a 51 page report of the Chief of the Civil Rights Division's Criminal Section dated March 31, 1976, embodying the results of the three-man study, limited to the above listed files, and concentrating almost exclusively on the pre-assassination surveillance of, and counterintelligence activities against, Dr. King.

The Assistant Attorney General recommended the creation of a Departmental Task Force to complete the review he and his team had begun. He also recommended an Advisory Committee of distinguished citizens to advise with the task force. The further review proposed included interrogation of material witnesses, reading all the pertinent field office files and reviewing all of the headquarters files relating to Dr. King and possibly to other civil rights activists. A recommendation was made to review tapes secured

by electronic surveillance with a view to determining which of such materials should be and could be legally destroyed. The Assistant Attorney General felt that the FBI should assess the culpability of its agents involved in the wrongdoing by the principals named in the report. His memorandum to the Attorney General concluded that probably criminal redress was time-barred, that civil remedies might be available to the King family but might also be more embarrassing than helpful, and hence that consideration be given to a direct payment by the settlement process or by a private bill to compensate the King survivors, or with the survivors' concurrence, the King Foundation; if this last issue were left to the task force or an Advisory Commission, it should consider the pros and cons and recommend as it sees fit.

The Attorney General forwarded the Civil Rights Division memoranda (and comments thereon from the Deputy Attorney General, the Solicitor General, and from staff members and the Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division) to the Counsel, Office of Professional Responsibility. The Attorney General charged the Office of Professional Responsibility with the work of completing the review begun by the Civil Rights Division. His memorandum states:

'My request for the review involved four matters. First, whether the FBI investigation of the Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination was thorough and honest; second, whether there was any evidence that the FBI was involved in the assassination of Dr. King; third, in light of the first two questions, whether there is any new evidence which has come to the attention of the Department concerning the assassination of Dr. King which should be dealt with by the appropriate authorities; fourth, whether the nature of the relationship between the Bureau and Dr. King calls for criminal prosecution, disciplinary proceedings, or other appropriate action.

As the fourth point, I again note that from the partial review which has been made, Mr. Pottinger concludes 'we have found that the FBI undertook a systematic program of harassment of Martin Luther King, by means both legal and illegal, in order to discredit him and harm both him and the movement he led.' Assuming that the major statutory violations relevant to this conduct would be 18 U.S.C. Section 241 and Section 242, Mr. Pottinger's memorandum concludes that any prosecution contemplated under those acts would now be barred by the five-year statute of limitations with the possible exception which would exist if there were proof of a continuing conspiracy.

As to the matter of new evidence with respect to the assassination my understanding is that the Department has never closed the Martin Luther King file and that numerous allegations of the possible involvement of co-conspirators are promptly investigated. The thrust of the review which I requested, however, was to determine whether a new look at what was done by the Bureau in investigating the assassination or in the relationship between the Bureau

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and Dr. King might give a different emphasis or new clues in any way to the question of involvement in that crime. At this point in the review, as I read the memoranda, nothing has turned up relevant on this latter point.

The review is not complete. Mr. Pottinger and all those who have commented upon his memorandum recommend that the review be completed. Mr. Pottinger also has made other recommendations upon which there is some difference of opinion. In my view, it is essential that the review be completed as soon as possible and in as thorough a manner as is required to answer the basic questions. In view of what has already been done, and the tentative conclusions reached, special emphasis should be given to the fourth question. In conducting this review you should call upon the Department to furnish to you the staff you need.

My conclusion as to the review conducted by the Civil Rights Division is that it has now shown that this complete review is necessary, particularly in view of the conclusion as to the systematic program of harassment. If your review turns up matters for specific action, we should discuss the best way to proceed on each such case."